

“Adversity: A Step on the Path to Success”
Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James
AFGSC Global Strike Challenge
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Thank you Airman Jackson, that was a very nice introduction. How about a round of applause for Airman Jackson?

-- you did a great job throughout the day, so thank you so much.

I also want to thank our leadership -- General Wilson, General Weinstein, General, so many others who are here with us today. Thank you, Ms. Creedon, for spending some time with us. We really appreciate it. And I also see so many of our terrific civic leaders from across Global Strike and the audience. I want to thank you again for all that you do in support of our airmen.

Most of all, a big shout out to the men and women of Global Strike.

It certainly is an hour and a deep, deep privilege for me to be able to come before you as the 23rd Secretary of the Air Force. I have now been on the job for about ten months and nothing pumps me up more than being with our terrific airmen and seeing them in action. So I'm really, really glad to be here, back in the Barksdale/Bossier City area.

During these ten months I want you to know I was sort of dividing my time between the Washington scene of policy work in the Pentagon and testifying before Congress and working on budgets and POMs and five year strategies and defense plans and so forth. But the other part of my time has been out and about and getting to see our Air Force in action. So far I have seen all five of our four missions in action. Forty-nine bases in 23 states, and I've also been overseas twice. I made a swing through the Middle East -- Afghanistan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar. I've also been to Europe one time. So I've been to the United Kingdom and Germany.

But I must say throughout the ten months I have had a special place in my heart as well as in my travel plans for the Air Force Global Strike bases. Almost since day one I have been tracking on the issues that are affecting our nuclear forces. And although I've been to a fair number of bases, there are still lots of bases that I haven't been to once let alone twice, but I have been to all of the Global Strike bases -- with the exception of Whiteman. I've been everywhere else in Global Strike Twice, Whiteman once. So I've got my eye on you and I'm going to keep coming back over and over and over again.

It's a special treat to be here for the Global Strike Challenge. Just like Madeline Creedon, it is my first time ever. And unlike General Kowalski who is hoping for a quiet evening, I am looking forward to a rousing and loud evening. Are you going to deliver?

There's no question in my mind that this week's challenge demonstrates your dedication, your skill, and your passion for the mission. And of course that's the same passion that I have seen over and over again when I have visited you at your locations, at your individual basis.

Just as you've heard speaker after speaker tell you, you have a truly powerful effect on our security in the United States and there is no mission more important to our security than the nuclear mission, which is why I take the nuclear enterprise so seriously and why I'm very focused on the successes of this, our Global Strike Command.

But just like in any endeavor, success maybe doesn't come easily and maybe doesn't come overnight, and success often comes after facing some degree of adversity.

I think in life it's not so much what happens to you, but rather after it happens to you, what are you going to do about it? That's what really counts, is what comes next.

Now let me ask this crowd. Has anybody ever heard the name Louis Zamperini? [Applause] Zamperini is a man with an incredible story. And let me just tell you a little bit about him for those of you perhaps who have not heard of Lou.

Lou Zamperini was a B-24 Liberator bombardier during World War II. As a matter of fact he only just recently passed away at the ripe old age of mid-90s, I'm pretty sure, in the last few months. And if this man didn't take and overcome adversity, I don't know who did. For you see, Lou Zamperini was part of the crew on a B-24 searching for another crew during World War II who had gone down in the waves of the Pacific, and while on that search Zamperini's aircraft also crashed into the sea. And there is where Lou Zamperini remained for some 47 days, adrift in the Pacific, alone. And he survived by fishing and by catching birds, and collecting rain water, all the while avoiding shark attacks. You listen to a story like that and it makes you realize that whatever problems we have, certainly we can overcome them if a guy like Lou Zamperini came through that.

Then on the 47th day he made it to land and he thought thank God, now I'm saved. But not so fast. It turns out that the land that he reached was the Marshall Islands which was occupied by the Japanese. At that point Lou Zamperini was taken prisoner and he was held as a prisoner of war for more than two years until the war ended.

So needless to say, this was a man who endured immense diversity. But eventually he returned to the United States with great honor. This story that I've just skimmed the surface of is told beautifully in a book called *Unbroken* by a woman named Laura Hilenbrand and soon, within the next month or two, it will roll out as a movie that we can all go and see and enjoy and learn more about the amazing life of Lou Zamperini.

That's adversity. That's what you do about it when it happens to you.

Here's another case in point that I was part of just a few short weeks ago. I was out in Colorado Springs within the last few weeks and as part of my visit out there I had the opportunity to observe Wounded Warrior Games, athletic games where we have competition between Army, Navy, Air Force and Special Operators, all of whom have undergone serious wounds, most of whom were

wounded in the most recent Iraq and Afghanistan operations. So these are men and women who have lost multiple limbs in some cases, some cases very severe PTSD, and they're working through their recovery through competition and through athletics. Just amazing, amazing rigorous exercise. I'll tell you what, I've never seen a basketball game as rigorous as the basketball game I saw with our Warriors who were in wheel chairs doing basketball. So they're working through their adversity and to a man and a woman, all they wanted to do was get back with their units and get back into the full-up military and in many cases back into the fight.

So that's another example of things that go wrong in your life or things, a curveball that's thrown, and it's what you do about it.

I'll give you one last form of adversity. Another example. This one comes from perhaps our most famous of all presidents, the 16th President, Abraham Lincoln. In 1858 Lincoln faced Steven Douglas in a hotly contested race for the U.S. Senate, and boy what an example of that to bring up on a day like today. This was a loss for Lincoln as it so turned out. And after losing to Douglas Lincoln said the following. He said, "For such an awkward fellow, I'm pretty sure-footed. It used to take a pretty dexterous man to throw me, but I remember the evening of the day in 1858 that decided the contest for the Senate between Mr. Douglas and myself. It was something like this. Dark, rainy and gloomy. I had been reading the returns and had ascertained that we had lost the legislature and started to go home. The path had been worn hogback and was slippery. My foot slipped from under me, knocking the other one out of the way. But I recovered myself and lit square. And I said to myself, it's a slip. It's not a fall. It's a slip, not a fall."

And of course you know the rest of the history quite well, for Lincoln went on to eventually become President and arguably the greatest President that we've ever had in the United States of America.

So what do Lou Zamperini and those Wounded Warriors of today and Abraham Lincoln all have in common? Well, there may have been a time when they were adrift, and there may have been a time when they were held prisoner, and they may have lost some limbs. They may have slipped. They may have been down for a while but they didn't fall, they didn't fully fall, or if they did, they got back up again.

In short, they faced down adversity, they worked through it, and they came right back stronger than ever before to go on to make history. And some of that history is yet to be written, yet to be fully written for those Wounded Warriors.

So it strikes me that that's the kind of thing that we always have to focus on in our lives. Whenever something happens it's what are you going to do about it? It's what comes next that really counts.

So let me bring this back home to the nuclear enterprise and I'm going to make it now personal.

It was just a couple of weeks into my tenure as Secretary of the Air Force that it came to the light that there had been a pretty severe cheating incident at Malmstrom Air Force Base among some of our missileers. The cheating had occurred on a monthly nuclear proficiency test.

Now for me, particularly as the brand new Secretary, this threw into question the entire safety and security of our nuclear enterprise. I had questioned very strongly can we as the American people rely upon and can we be sure that our nuclear enterprise is safe and secure? So there were a lot of questions on my mind. What did all this really mean for safety and security? How did it happen in the first place? And most importantly, what were we going to do about it?

By the way, all of these issues were also on the mind of General Welsh and some of our other key leaders and we recognized it was a really important thing and we needed to get on top of this as soon as possible.

So let me flash forward. Within just a matter of a couple of days and lots of briefings and asking questions and having those questions answered to my satisfaction at least, I certainly convinced myself that the safety and security of our nuclear enterprise was solid. That this was a bad failure of integrity on the part of some of our airmen, but it was not a failure of the nuclear enterprise. So that was point one.

From that point forward General Welsh and I both embarked on a tour of our [inaudible], of course he had been before and I had never been before so it was all brand new to me. But off we went, separately I might add, to Malmstrom, FE Warren and Minot, because of course as I said earlier, there was certainly more to the story than just the cheating incident and I for one felt like I needed to get out and do some of my own due diligence so that I could understand it.

So while General Welsh and I were there, again we went separately but we were tracking to all of the same bases, we did a number of things. We held focus groups, we visited facilities, and we spoke to all sorts of people at all different levels. So certainly we had briefings from all of the top leaders, but in addition to that we talked to missileers, the defenders and the launch control officer and the maintainers and the cooks and everybody who was in some way related to the mission of the ICBMs. And for me, I toured extensively. So I went to see a launch control center and I went to see some of these facilities that I had never seen before. And at the end of the trip we each came back to Washington. I had what I call my seven observations, and I sort of got my old papers out and re-read them just to see if I still thought that those original observations were about right. I'd like to just share those with you.

General Welsh had his own observations, but when we compared notes, although we might use slightly different language to describe the situation, they were remarkably close. So here are the seven observations that I came away with after that very first trip just a few weeks into my tenure.

Number one, it did seem to me from everything that I had seen and all I had talked to that our nuclear force was suffering from something broader than just simply this one isolated cheating

situation. That there seemed to be institutional and cultural things going on in the community that we needed to address.

So I'm talking about things like a culture that seemed over-the-top micro-managing. At least that's the way it seemed to me. Where even the smallest of points had to go to higher headquarters to get approval.

There was also great fear in back of these tests. There was the fear of not scoring 100 percent because those test scores were being used in ways I suspect they were never intended. They were being used to either advance or not advance our airmen. Even though the standard was 90 percent.

The second thing that struck me was that we needed better accountability at all levels. At junior levels as well as at senior levels within our nuclear enterprise. And of course with accountability also has to come empowerment which is one of the themes that we've been talking about throughout the day.

The third observation is somewhere along the line, it struck me that we had lost the distinction between training and evaluation in that community. And that rather than having a culture of continuous improvement where we train in order to learn, and it was okay to make a mistake because that way you would get better and you would learn, instead it was a culture of always testing or preparing to be tested, and that fed into the fear of not getting 100 percent. So somehow we had to get back to having both training and reasonable evaluation and a culture of continuous improvement.

Number four, I was absolutely convinced that this was a failure of integrity and that we needed to rededicate ourselves across the Air Force to our core values of integrity, service and excellence, and making sure that there was dignity and respect for all.

Number five, we needed to, I thought, work more on professional development for our nuclear leaders. Again, at all levels so that nuclear leaders could see a path to the top and a way to get there and different types of experiences to enrich their careers.

Then my number six and seven observations have to do with put your money where your mouth is. So it seemed to me that although we had been saying for years that the nuclear mission was number one, at least I wasn't convinced that we were putting adequate resources and making that talk real. In other words, we weren't sufficiently walking the talk.

So my number six observation was that maybe we needed to look at better incentives or rewards or recognition for the people who were serving in our number one nuclear enterprise.

And number seven, there were a number of other both short and longer term investments and sustainment items that seemed to need attention. So this was everything from manning. We had gross undermanning I thought in the enterprise. And we needed to refurbish the launch control

centers. And spare parts weren't always in supply. And equipment for the defenders was extremely old. So all of these things I just noted as I went around.

And by the way, we had shortages throughout our Air Force, but it seemed to me to be particularly intense within the nuclear enterprise.

Again, General Welsh was making his observations. He might not have used exactly my language but our list was remarkably close in terms of what needed to be done.

Now at about that same time General Wilson ordered a commander-directed investigation into the actual cheating incident and very importantly, he launched the Force Improvement Program.

And finally, as you've already heard talked about, the Secretary of Defense has been all over this and he ordered two reviews, one of which was conducted by Ms. Creedon. The other was conducted by General Welsh and Admiral Harvey, to provide him with some advice on which way to go and how to improve the situation within our nuclear enterprise.

So all of this was going on in near simultaneous fashion.

Now let's talk the FIP for just a moment. The FIP was all about getting your input on how to improve the nuclear mission because we have lots of bright ideas in Washington, but really it comes down to in many ways you know best, so you need to help bubble up these ideas and that's exactly what the FIP did. So by listening to the ideas that bubbled up from all of you in the field, General Wilson and his team, and I helped a bit as well, came up with a plan aimed at improving all aspects of how the nuclear mission is accomplished. Everything from training to the environment that you work in, and now that plan is being put into action.

So let's just go over some of the things that are happening now and that are going to be happening in the not too distant future. Meaning over the next few months and the next few years.

You already heard that we have redirected about half a billion dollars to the nuclear enterprise. So that's a done deal. We've already announced it. We've talked about it publicly in the past, but I will predict to you there's more to follow. So I would stay tuned. By the time our next budget rolls out, by the time our next five year defense plan rolls out with that next budget, you are going to see more resources come toward the nuclear enterprise. And this will be for things like nuclear facility sustainment, bomber and ICBM operation support, launch control center refurbishment, the sensor equipment, uniforms, and other ideas that you came up with through the Force Improvement initiative.

And as I mentioned, I intend to be on about a six month rotation, coming back to the bases every six or seven months because I want to make sure that the dollars are flowing and that the impact is being felt.

Another thing. No longer will 100 percent test scores be used to either advance or not advance our airmen. Instead, the expectation has been laid out there that the commanders need to know their airmen. They need to know the totality of their record. They need to know them as people. This is the way that airmen will advance or not. It will need to be a holistic approach and not use those test scores in a way that was never intended.

We're also devoting more resources to ROTC missile scholarships. So there's already been one year scholarships awarded to upcoming seniors graduating in 2015, and we are anticipating probably 20 more at least additional scholarships later on in '15.

During the Air Force Association meeting in September I announced that we would be giving up to \$300 monthly in special duty assignment pay for certain of our enlisted career fields throughout the nuclear enterprise and \$300 a month in assignment incentive pay for the officers who execute and support our nuclear mission out in the missile fields. This is designed quite simply to recognize the incredible responsibility that rests on the shoulders of these airmen who guard and operate our nuclear assets. You earned it, and pretty soon you're going to get it. They'll be retroactive to October 1st.

Another issue that we're addressing is the issue of undermanning. For those balancing the workload in the field or on the flight line, we're reinvigorating eight of our critical career fields and we'll be ensuring that highly talented and competitive airmen fill these elite billets. So we're going to do away with that undermanning. It's going to take us some time to get there but we're going to get there, up to 100 percent manning in those eight critical career fields.

Thank you General Weinstein and General Vander Hamm because I know you have issued directives to your airmen designed to better empower our nuclear airmen at all levels and try to turn the tide away from the micro-managing culture toward a culture of more empowerment and more continuous improvement.

Finally, we're going to have a four star general who will lead General Strike Command and a three star A10 which will be my top advisor at the HAF staff. We're working through all of this now with the Department of Defense, and ultimately these will be nominations that will go to the Senate.

And finally, last but not least, General Wilson together with all of you is going to be transitioning the Force Improvement Program from a program into an actual command philosophy. So this will be the heart of this continuous Force Improvement philosophy to examine what you do every day, and every day come up with ways to make it better.

So this is where I want to underscore we really need your help, your continued help, to continue to improve the nuclear enterprise, by funneling up the best ideas through your leadership so that we can take action.

After all, this is really the goal of the force improvement program, and indeed the entire philosophy. It's about grassroots ideas making their way to the top so we can improve on how we execute this critical mission.

Ultimately we need to institutionalize all of this. As you heard General Kowalski talk earlier, there were lots of changes made earlier, but somewhere along the line we took our eye off the ball. We're not going to take our eye off the ball this time. We need to institutionalize these changes to make sure that they endure because ultimately this is on all of you and you need to own these changes and you need to make them happen and endure.

So basically, as I look back, we've come through some periods of adversity. We had a question earlier about the press. The press, I will tell you, thrives on controversy. They thrive on controversy. And more controversy tends to be of a negative nature than a positive nature. And because nuclear weapons are so important and because they are so destructive, any form of controversy in this community is very likely to hit the cracks. That's just part of the bargain that we're all involved with.

So we have had a period of diversity but just like Lou Zamperini and those Wounded Warriors and Abraham Lincoln in my three examples, adversity can breed resilience and innovation and it can bind us together as a more solid team, and we will come back stronger.

So in this case the lessons learned in overcoming past adversity are lessons that serve, as an example I think, to all of our airmen, not just to our nuclear airmen. It's bold leadership, it's innovation, passion for the Air Force core values. These are the things that I'm calling upon all airmen across our Air Force to strive for, and I can't underscore enough the importance of integrity, service and excellence. We all need to keep those near and dear and not stray from those core values.

Now the example you set over the last year, at least over the last year, really much more than the last year, does show our airmen across the service, and I'm talking about our Combat Air Forces, our Mobility Air Forces, our Space Air Force, our Cyber Air Force, all parts of our Air Force, that overcoming adversity really is a step on the path to success.

As I mentioned, I am going to be coming back again. The next time that I project I will be coming back is in the month of February, so I'll be rotating through our nuclear bases at that time.

Just one quick story before I close. We have a body in the Department of Defense, in the Air Force. It's called the Nuclear Oversight Board. So four times a year we as a top leadership team, both military, meaning our top four star leaders across the Air Force, and our civilians, we get together as a team and we talk about the important nuclear issues of the day. Again, four times a year. It is typically held in Washington, DC. But not this next time. Not this next time. So in February I want you to know, get ready, Minot, we're coming your way.

I know Minot in February because I've already done it, but not all of the four stars have been there, not all have been there in the month of February, but we're about to rectify that. And of course in the military there's always code names and acronyms. This is no different. So this visit of the Nuclear Oversight Board in February is code named OFTS which stands for Operation Free Those Four Stars.

It will be good for them. Character building.

So I want to thank you again. I want to thank you again for the tremendous work you do. I want to echo Madeline Creedon's remarks about how hard you work, the excellence that you bring to the job, and we're going to do our job for you.

So thanks a million. I really appreciate everything that you're doing, and I'd love to do my best to answer your questions. Thank you.